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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: SEIDNAYA PRISON RIOTS STIR CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Classified By: Classified by POL/ECON Chief Tim Pounds, for reasons
1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: During a July 5 routine sweep by military police trainees at the Sednaya Prison (located 20 miles NW of Damascus), violence erupted between inmates and guards and resulted in some 25 deaths and 90 injuries. As of COB on July 7, the hostage crisis was still continuing. The SARG issued a brief press statement on July 6 and has restricted media coverage since. Speculation continues on how the demonstration started and the affiliations of people involved. Human rights and security contacts suggest the majority of the prison population are Kurdish and Islamists. To our knowledge, no Amcits or any of the Embassy's human rights contacts are in the Sednaya facility. End Summary.

Timeline of Events

¶2. (C) At approximately 6:00AM local time on July 5, a group of military police trainees arrived at Sednaya to conduct a routine sweep of inmate quarters. (Note: Sources tell us Sednaya hosts a large number of &hard political prisoners8 including Kurds, Islamists, Communists, and even members of the military who have committed a crime.) Prisoners physically overpowered an unknown number of these officers, took their weapons, and held them hostage. Those MPs who were able to escape phoned for help and reinforcements, which arrived and entered the facility shortly thereafter. According to local sources, these reinforcements entered the chaotic situation and fired into the crowd, killing approximately 25 and leaving 90 injured. Several human rights contacts told us they were unable to confirm reports by websites outside of Syria that the troops had fired indiscriminately on prisoners.

¶3. (C) According to an RSO source, military personnel continued their assault and were able to separate prisoners not involved in the violence and evacuated them to the roof as the riots continued into the afternoon. As the riots continued, some prisoners were able to access cell phones to make calls to lawyers, family, and reporters. Military officials brought in ambulances to transport the wounded prisoners to nearby Tishreen hospital.

¶4. (C) At approximately 1500, the military attempted to negotiate via cell phone with prisoner Samir Bahar, an alleged "Islamist" who acted as spokesman. According to one source, the military articulated two demands: 1) end the riots; and (2) immediately release the military hostages. Bahar reportedly replied that the prisoners were prepared to end the violence and release the hostages if they could secure a guarantee there would be no retaliation against the prisoners by the military forces. (Note: One source estimates there are between 40 to 100 soldiers being held by the prisoners.) No agreement was reached, and by 1630 security forces had cut off phone lines, electricity, and water in the prison and the surrounding area. Government, press, and human rights contacts confirmed reports of continuing violence into

the morning of July 7.

SARG Seeks to Control the Story

¶15. (C) After heavy regional and international press coverage on July 6, the SARG instructed locally based reporters to discontinue reporting on the story. Two human rights contacts who gave public interviews to Arab media outlets received threats of imprisonment from the state security services if they continued to speak publicly. The SARG also reportedly blocked access to roads near the prison.

¶16. (C) Following SARG instructions, the local Syrian press ignored the story. On July 6, the SARG broke its silence on the Sednaya violence and issued a short statement through state-run news outlet SANA, saying that the "prisoners convicted of extremism and terrorism" were responsible for the violence, and military forces immediately intervened to "restore calm to the prison."

¶17. (SBU) Paris and London-based opposition websites (citing unnamed opposition sources in Beirut) claimed the riots were spurred by mistreatment of prisoners. Another story suggested prison guards were defiling the Koran in order to anger the Islamist prisoners and incite violence. Thus far, media reports have not put this current prison uprising into the broader context of another Sednaya riot earlier this year in protest of inhumane living conditions.

Conspiracy Theory Frenzy

¶18. (SBU) Conflicting media accounts have generated a number of explanations about what may have actually happened and who was behind it these events. Pro-government contacts are pointing to accusations by opposition websites outside of Syria that were quick to allege mistreatment of prisoners. Some Syrians were suggesting that opposition websites were acting in cooperation with prison rioters in an attempt to embarrass President Asad days before his planned departure for the Mediterranean Union Summit in Paris.

¶19. (SBU) Another story making the rounds is that security services themselves provoked these events in order to undermine the SARG's ongoing engagement of Israel and the West. We have also heard the SARG is blaming the Saudis for fomenting this violence among Islamist prisoners in Syria, and provoking a government crackdown in order to embarrass the Asad regime.

Follow Up

¶10. (C) Contacts from the Canadian, French, British, and German embassies say they are not currently planning to issue a statement or advise their capitals to do so, but we have heard that the German, French, and UK ambassadors are considering a joint approach to FM Muallem to seek clarification and express concern about protecting innocents.

¶11. (SBU) To the best of our knowledge there are no American citizens currently held in the Sednaya facility.

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